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AUTHOR	Ginsberg, Amy
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ABSTRACT

An intense debate exists around the most beneficial and successful method for teaching young children how to read. On the one side is sight-reading or the look-say method which promotes learning to read by immediate recognition of words learned through "memorization." In contrast to the sight method, the phonics method aims at teaching children the "skills" necessary to "decode" any words that may present themselves. This paper examines both phonics and sight-reading to ascertain which method proves more beneficial in giving children the necessary tools to read. The paper first reviews the literature and then finds that the research illustrates that the teaching of phonics is crucial for reading development, because, unlike sight-reading, phonics offers children the ability to decode words. It concludes that current teachers and new teachers need to receive phonics-based training and school districts need to increase funding for phonics programs. (NKA)

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And the War Continues... Phonics vs. Sight-Reading

Amy Ginsberg

Dominican University of California
School of Education
San Rafael, CA
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A Ginsberg

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Introduction

Knowing how to read remains a critical factor for survival and success in life. Unfortunately, learning how to read is neither an easy process nor the same process for all. As a result, an intense debate exists around the most beneficial and successful method for teaching young children how to read. On the one side, sight-reading or the look-say method exists which promotes learning to read by immediate recognition of words learned through *memorization* (Gunning, 2000). In contrast to the sight method, the phonics method aims at teaching children the *skills* necessary to *decode* any words that may present themselves (Gunning, 2000). I have been fortunate to see first-hand both the sight and the phonics reading methods at work. I have seen children read through decoding and have seen how this decoding skill allows them to sound out words of which they have never encountered before. However, I have also seen children sight-reading, children who lack the decoding skill. While these children read the words they have previously memorized, they falter when reading unknown words.

Statement of the Problem

Does the children's faltering in reading stem from the inability to use phonics as a means to sound out the words? When examining both phonics and sight-reading, which method does indeed prove more beneficial in giving children the necessary tools to read? In addition, does the outcome change for children with disabilities?

Review of the Literature

When comparing the phonics method to that of sight learning, the basic, inherent qualities of each must be recognized and compared. In her article, Albert (1995) illustrates that the key difference between the two reading methodologies relates to the

concept of skill and skill development. The learning of skills contains four elements: the development through repetition over a length of time and with direct feedback, the ability to transfer skills between similar tasks, the gradual, but continual improvement over time, and the long lasting ability to use the skills once learned (3). Because skills allow for continual development and long-lasting usage, Albert argues that phonics proves to be the best method. By learning phonics, the children learn a skill, that is, the ability to transform letters into communicative words. Furthermore, because phonics is a skill and skills last for years, children's reading ability will remain for a lifetime (4). The children learning to read through phonics will have the skills necessary to decode words and therefore will be able to read objects that directly affect their lives such as street signs, their favorite books, and so on. In opposition, the sight-reading method, which relies on memorization, is fleeting (5). While children may recognize words immediately at one time, years later when these children reach middle school, they will not necessarily be able to remember words that they learned years ago through drill nor will they be able to read more complex texts.

Like Albert, Juel (1996) argues that phonics instruction remains the most successful method, as opposed to the sight method, in helping children learn to read. Similar to Albert, Juel also refers to phonics as a skill; a skill that offers children the cues to decode unknown words. Juel states that this decoding skill empowers children by giving them a "sense of independence," the ability to sound out or decode unfamiliar words on their own without constant drills and rote memorization (767). In her article, Juel describes the results of an experiment with first grade children. The experiment was to see if the knowledge of phonics was related to the number of reading errors. Children

with phonics ability made significantly fewer errors than the children without the phonics knowledge (769). Juel goes on to say that further evidence suggests that the main difference between children's reading levels directly relates to the children's ability to sound out words. Therefore, as Juel firmly believes, phonics is "the critical hurdle for the [children]," a hurdle that once accomplished will help the children for years to come (774). In fact, Juel ascertains that children's early learning of phonics skills very accurately foreshadows their later reading comprehension (775).

Similar to Albert and Juel, Lyon (1997) strongly believes that phonics reigns supreme over all other reading methods. According to Lyon, the failure to read remains a significant educational problem. In his testimony given before the Committee on Education and the Workforce in the U.S. House of Representatives on July 10, 1997, Lyon argues that specific factors exist which affect children's ability to read. He states:

> "... for about half of our nation's children, learning to read is a... formidable challenge, and for at least 20 to 30 percent of these youngsters, reading is one of the most difficult tasks that they will have to master throughout their life" (1).

This difficulty somewhat stems from the difficulties inherent in the English language. Lyon breaks down these difficulties in the English language and discusses what the reading process must entail in order to overcome these obstacles. He illustrates that the English alphabet contains abstract letters, which in turn link with abstract sounds. Because of this direct relationship, children learning to read must understand the relationship between sounds and letters. Children must also understand that this relationship presents itself in written form. Therefore, children must develop phonics skills necessary for accurate reading development and fluency (3). Contrastingly,

children without this phonics skill and who utilize sight-reading methods often read in a hesitant manner marked by many mispronunciations. When children read in this slow fashion, they frequently fail to comprehend. This inability to comprehend occurs because the children spend too much time reading the words and "taxing their memory" and the energy they have left fails to be enough to remember and to understand what they have read (6). Therefore, as Lyon (1996) states, phonics proves to be critical for "there is no way to bypass this decoding... stage of reading" (2).

Along with Lyon, Stephenson and Reynolds (1998-1999) argue for the importance of phonics in relation to reading development for children. Stephenson and Reynolds mention Lyon's argument that children with phonics knowledge can overcome the obstacles that learning to read may present. According to Lyon, "phonics is non-negotiable" (3). While Stephenson and Reynolds present phonics as the best method for reading development, they go beyond observable reasons and focus on the brain. Stephenson and Reynolds present Lyon's comments regarding the brain's functions:

> "The refined knowledge of how the brain processes language... proves beyond any reasonable doubt that phonics-based instruction is the most rational way to start young children on the path to literacy, no matter what their I.Q.s, backgrounds or learning problems may be" (3).

While Stephenson and Reynolds illustrate phonics as being a critical tool when learning to read, they also reveal information regarding reading instruction in relation to learning disabilities, mainly dyslexia. The two focus on dyslexia because this disability affects more children than any other learning disability. Interestingly enough, eighty percent of all children who have learning disabilities are actually dyslexic with the inability to read their main problem (4). In the 1960s, researchers believed that dyslexia stemmed from the inability to recognize patterns in word/letter associations. Now, scientists know that

the condition's "manifestations" actually stem from the inability to recognize sounds and not patterns (4). Therefore, the inherent problem behind dyslexia is the lack of phonemic awareness. Stephenson and Reynolds make the connection between dyslexia and reading and offer strategies for helping children with dyslexia become readers. The two refer to Torgesen to further illustrate the brain's connection to reading development. Torgesen is convinced that the brain processes language through sound patterns. Stephenson and Reynolds show that Torgesen's research findings support the belief that children with dyslexia cannot recognize different sound patterns (6). The authors also show that Torgensen makes the argument that had these children received phonics instruction in their early years, most of these children would be able to read.

While phonics proves successful for children with or without dyslexia, supporters of sight-reading argue that teaching children the skills to decode words without regard to context "undermines a natural approach to understanding language and makes it more difficult" (6). Stephenson and Reynolds refute this, offering Torgesen's response that without the ability to decode words, children do not understand context because they are unable to decipher enough words to gain meaning from readings. In addition, the authors emphasize Torgesen's findings that showed when children with dyslexia underwent intense phonics instruction, these children, two and a half years later, were reading close to the class reading average (7).

Summary

As the research illustrates, the teaching of phonics is crucial for reading development. Unlike sight-reading, phonics offers children the ability to decode words. Contrastingly, sight-reading gives children the chance to memorize words.

Unfortunately, word memorization is temporary. In addition, the study and subsequent findings of the English language lends itself to the belief that phonics instruction is important for reading development. Because the English language contains abstract words and sounds, the teaching of phonics makes the English language more manageable.

While the success of phonics instruction can be measured by observable increases in children's ability to read, the benefits of phonics over sight-reading can also be determined by an analysis of the patterns of learning. The human brain is pre-disposed to learn language through patterns, sound patterns (Stephenson & Reynolds, 6). Therefore, phonics, and not sight-reading, offers the opportunity to unlock and to understand the sounds and their differences. As all articles argue, phonics is critical for reading development and comprehension. In addition, phonics is the only proven method that helps children with dyslexia overcome their obstacles and begin reading. As Torgesen states, "give [all] children the basic strategies to decode words... Then watch what they do with it" (Stephenson & Reynolds, 6).

Implications

Data from the brief literature review indicates that phonics skills provide children with a critical tool in their reading development. While many school districts do indeed support the phonics method, educators have little knowledge of phonics and its function in reading development. Current teachers and new teachers need to receive phonics-based training. Furthermore, school districts need to increase funding for phonics programs. Through additional funding, districts will be able to provide phonics resources to teachers, students, and families.

It seems apparent that learning how to read proves neither to be easy nor inherently natural. If reading happened to be easy or natural, illiteracy would not exist. Sight-reading fails to offer children the skills necessary to attack unfamiliar words. On the other hand, phonics provides children with a solid base with which to begin reading. In conclusion, the ability to decode words promotes knowledge and self-confidence, and subsequently a greater love of reading. This love of reading is the ultimate goal and I believe that phonics provides the opportunity through which this goal can be achieved.

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